IDENTITY [*]

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Introduction

Within identity theory, an identity is a set of meanings defining who one is in a role (e.g., father, plumber, student), in a group or social category (e.g., member of a church or voluntary association, an American, a Female), or a unique individual (e.g., a highly moral person, an assertive person, an outgoing person) (Burke and Stets 2009). Identities answer the question of what it means to an individual to be, for example, a blacksmith, or an Israeli, or a moral person. Identities tell us who we are and they announce to others who we are. Identities guide behavior that is in accord with the meanings defining the identity. Thus, fathers act like "fathers," nurses act like "nurses," and dominant people act "dominant." People protect their identities, actively working to maintain being defined by themselves and others in the way they are as a father, or Israeli, or moral person.

People have multiple identities. Each identity tells what it means to the individual to be, as examples, a father, a Muslim-American, or an outgoing person. And, when identities ae activated, people behave in ways that are consistent with these meanings. If several identities are activated at the same time, people try to portray all of the relevant meanings, either simultaneously or serially. People act in ways that confirm the meanings of who they are, acting, for example, more fair if they have a high fairness identity or less fair if they have a low fairness identity. And, people react to any suggestion that they are not coming across in a situation in a manner that is consistent with their identity. If a person with a high dominance identity thinks others see them as not very dominant, they become upset and work to change how they are coming across so that others will see them the way they see themselves.

Our identities tie us as individuals to the groups, the social categories, and the roles that make up society. Identities are the link between the individual and society or social structure. Identities tell us who we are, give us existential meaning, and tell us how to act. Identities tell others who we are so that they know how to act toward us and what to expect of us. In this chapter we will review the concept of identity as seen in identity theory and show how it is related to the many aspects of the self, to interaction with others, and to the creation and maintenance of society.

Origins of Identity Theory

Identity theory as a set of ideas has been developing since its basic outlines were independently developed in the 1960's by both McCall (1966) and Stryker (1968). McCall and Stryker both drew upon the symbolic interaction tradition and the work of Mead (1934) to understand the social origins of the self as well as the development and function of identities in society. The term "symbolic interaction" was coined by Herbert Blumer (1962, 1969), in his exegesis of the thinking of Mead, to denote a perspective that focuses on the unique character of human interaction that centers on meaning and the shared use of symbols. Symbols can be used to represent objects and events in the situation (including other symbols) even when the objects and events are not present. Words are symbols, for example, that are used to communicate ideas and meanings.

Symbolic interaction makes note of the fact that when people interact, the exact behaviors are not important; what these behaviors mean *is* important. By sharing a common symbolic framework, people share an understanding of the words and gestures (symbols) they use and can thus communicate, share ideas, and collectively plan and organize themselves. When people talk, they respond to their own words in the way that

others who share the symbolic culture also respond to those words. By sharing the same response to words and gestures, meaning is shared.

The use of symbols, as Mead acknowledges, is possible because of the development of the self, that is the ability of the mind of a person to perceive and reflexively recognize the self and treat the self as an object, much like any other object in the situation. This ability allows the mind/self to think about and both act toward and react to the self in the same way that the self can think about and act on and react to any other part of the social environment. Perception of the social situation and action in the situation are intertwined and related through a mind that has socially developed to respond, not just to the environment, but also to the relationship between the person and the environment, adjusting each to meet the needs, goals, and desires of the person. This connection between perception and action or behavior is central to identity theory, as is the understanding that behavior is always in the pursuit of the goals of the person.

Being part of a culture, one comes to learn the concepts, the categories and classifications, the meanings and expressions that are used by others in the culture to understand the world. Stryker (2002 [1980]) has noted this in his statement of the set of assumptions underlying the structural version of symbolic interactionism within which identity theory is set. He states that behavior is dependent on a named and classified world. The names point to aspects of the environment and carry meaning in the form of expectations about those aspects of the environment that are shared with others. One learns how to classify and name objects and how to behave with respect to those objects and their names through interactions with others in the community. Among those class terms, Stryker suggests, are the names that are used to designate shared understanding of the positions in the social structure such as teacher, student, truck driver, African-American,

police officer, and so on. As applied to the self, these shared understandings or meanings become one's identities.

Because these meanings are shared within the culture, actions by the self based on them will be understood commonly by the self and by others. As Mead has made clear, the meaning conveyed by symbols is shared in society by general consensus. The meaning of a symbol is the shared reaction to the symbol. People understand the word "fire" because they have the same reaction as others to the word (symbol) "fire." Thus, we can communicate by using symbols (words and gestures), and both we and our communication partner know what we are saying. The actions/meanings conveyed in an identity both tell us who we are and tell others who we are. If I am in the social position named "sister," I label myself "sister," and others know I am a "sister." Because we hold the meanings/identities of sister for ourselves, we know how to act and how we fit in to society. Because the positions/identities we hold for ourselves are related to other positions in society that are held by others (e.g., "brother") who have identities based on those other positions, they know how to act toward us and we know how to act toward them. Because we share the meanings within a common culture, we can interact with others in meaningful ways, understand each other, communicate with each other, and plan together. Through meanings, then, identities tie people to each other, to groups, and to society (Burke and Reitzes 1981).

Identity Characteristics

In addition to the meanings that define an identity, each identity has several other characteristics. The characteristics of identities that are most generally discussed in research are the *salience* (or the general probability that the identity will be activated in a

situation)*, commitment* (or the strength of one's ties to others through the identity)*,* and *prominence* of the identity (or the importance of the identity to the self). Two people may have a spouse identity, but each may differ on one or more of these three characteristics: one may be more or less salient than the other, more or less prominent, or have more or less committed (Stryker 1968, Stryker and Serpe 1982, 1994).

Each of these characteristics modifies the way identities impact our behavior. Because everyone has many identities, for the roles we play, for the groups and organizations to which we belong, for the social categories which place us in society, and for the many individuating characteristics that make us unique individuals, it is impossible for all identities to be active at once. Most identities that one has are turned off most of the time, and activated only as needed. Different identities are activated at different times, and some identities are activated more frequently than others. The term *salience* of an identity refers to how frequently the identity is activated. A highly salient identity is likely to be relevant in many situations and therefore activated frequently. If the grandfather identity of a person is highly salient, the person may find opportunities to activate this identity, even in situations that normally may not call it up. For example, at the office one may hear, "Did I show you the latest pictures of my grandkids?" Other identities may have very low salience and become activated only occasionally, as, for example, the organizer identity of the person who organizes the year end company picnic.

In addition to salience, identities also differ in *commitment*, or the strength of the ties to others because of the identity. The more people who know you because of the identity, the more people who have expectations for you in terms of the identity. These expectations and ties to others link one more strongly to the social structure as people generally try to live up to their expectations. Being tied to more or fewer other people because of one's

identity is the quantitative part of commitment: more people more commitment. Another, more qualitative, part of commitment has to do with the quality of the ties to the others who know you because of your identity. The stronger those ties to others, the stronger your commitment to the identity. Again, commitment to an identity is something that varies from identity to identity. Some identities link you to only a few others, some identities link you to many others. One of the dicta of identity theory is that the stronger the commitment to the identity, the more salient will be the identity. Having positive, strong relations with lots of people in terms of an identity gives one many opportunities to activate that identity.

The *prominence* of an identity, which is to say, how important the identity is to you, is another important aspect of identities that varies from one identity to another. A golfer identity may be very important to one person and not very important to another. For some, a worker identity may be more important than a spousal identity, for others the reverse may be true. Prominence, like commitment, leads to salience. More important identities are more likely to be enacted in situations. Knowing the prominence, commitment, and salience of identities can help explain why, for example, two persons with the same work identity, for example accountant, may differ in their approach to work, with one running home at quitting time, while the other stays on, continuing to work and get ahead.

The Content of Identities

Identities contain the meanings that tell us and others who we are when those meanings are displayed in our behavior. If we have the identity of a teacher, we act like a teacher, we dress like a teacher, we do the things that teachers do. The meanings that individual teachers hold for themselves may vary to a certain extent. Teachers may be more or less strict, more or less compassionate, more or less child-centered. Identity theory developed a

set of procedures that allow us to measure the meanings that people hold for themselves in terms of their identities (Burke and Tully 1977). Based on the work of Osgood, et al. (1957), meanings are understood as a mediational responses to a stimulus. It is mediational in the sense that it is an internal cognitive/emotional process that stands between the stimulus and a behavioral response to the stimulus. It gives us a moment to categorize and understand the stimulus so that we can take appropriate action rather than simply react to the stimulus. In measuring meaning, the responses that people have to stimuli are measured and the underlying dimensions of those responses are discovered.

For example, Burke and Tully (1977) measured the gender identity of sixth, seventh, and eighth, grade boys and girls. The children responded to questionnaires that asked them to separately rate "boys are…" and "girls are…" on a series of 34 adjective pairs. The dimensions that most discriminated between what it means to be a boy and what it means to be a girl for these school children were captured by responses to the adjective pairs soft/hard, weak/strong, girlish/boyish, emotional/not emotional, and smooth/rough. Girls were seen as more soft, weak, girlish, emotional, and smooth while boys were seen as more hard, strong, boyish, not emotional, and rough. The boys and girls then rated themselves on the same 34 adjective pairs in response to "as a boy I am…" or "as a girl I am…". The self-ratings on the most discriminating items were then used to calculate gender identity scores for each person, ranging from the more masculine (-3) to the more feminine (+3). The gender behaviors of the children were then found to match the gender identity scores (Burke and Tully 1977). School performance in language arts, math, social studies, and other subjects was also predictable from their gender identity scores with both boys and girls with "girlish" identities doing better at language arts and both boys and girls with "boyish" identities doing better at math and science (Burke 1989).

In a similar way, Burke and Reitzes (1980, 1981) measured what it means to be a college student. Following the Burke-Tully method using adjective-pairs relevant to being a student, they discovered four different dimensions of meaning along which students saw themselves. These were academic responsibility, intellectualism, sociability, and personal assertiveness. They found that students who were planning to go to graduate school were higher on academic responsibility and intellectualism than those planning to work after school. Similarly, those students involved in more social activities were higher on sociability and personal assertiveness than those students who were less involved in social activities. Again, we see the correspondence between the meanings held in the identity and the behaviors that are manifest by those meanings.

In addition to gender identity and the student identity, these same procedures have allowed the measurement of meanings associated with several other identities and allowed those identities to be related to the meaningful behaviors resulting from them identity. These include the spouse identity with meanings having to do with the roles of husbands and wives (Burke and Stets 1999), old-age identity with meanings of isolation and being useless (Mutran and Burke 1979a, b), the moral identity with meanings of fairness and care (Stets and Carter 2011, 2012, Savage et al. 2016), Ethnic identity with meanings pertaining to both heritage and personal dimensions (Burke, Cerven, and Harrod 2009), and a leadership identity (Burke 2016, Riley and Burke 1995). In each case, people are seen to behave in ways, the meanings of which are congruent with the identity meanings. By using the same procedures that measure self/identity meanings, the meanings of different behaviors can be assessed. It was, if fact, the development of the measurement procedures that allowed identity theory to grow and develop as a theory, through test and retest.

The Bases of Identities

Three bases for identities have been recognized: social identities, role identities, and person identities (Burke and Stets 2009). First, in common with social identity theory, identity theory recognizes that many identities are based on the social categories and groups recognized by society and understood in the culture. These include identities such as racial and ethnic identities, gender identity, country region, and geographic identities such as American or Israeli or Mid-westerner. But, also included are identities based on belonging to particular organizations and groups such as member of the local parent-teacher association (PTA) or student at the university of X. Unlike identities based on social categories, identities based on group membership generally involve more direct interaction with others in the group and a feeling of being accepted in the group. Again, the content of any of these identities is meaning: what it means to be an American or a female or a member of the PTA. By portraying these meanings, whether in actions or rituals such as going to prayer meetings, costume or dress such as wearing the school uniform, one affirms the identity, and announces the identity to both the self and to others.

The second basis for identities are the roles people play in groups, organizations, and society in general. The role-based identities include identities such as fire-fighter, truck driver, professor, and student. Unlike social identities that are generally conveyed by *being* an American or a Mid-westerner, role identities involve performing the role, doing the things that someone in the role does such as engaging in the activities and behaviors of a fire-fighter or going to classes and studying as a student. Often, too, for any role there are one or more counter-role relationships that are necessary for the role performance. For example, husband is understood with respect to wife, teacher to student, but also teacher to principal. Performing any role involves interacting with persons in these counter-roles;

each depends upon the other in order to enact the role. Meanings are not only about who you are, but what you do.

While both social and role identities tie a person to the social structure as a member of a category or group or in a role relationship with others, the third basis of an identity is more individualistic. Person identities are based on the unique individual that one is. Person identities distinguish between individuals, for example, whether a person is dominant or submissive (or somewhere in between), the level of morality that a person holds for him or herself, or the level of fairness a person tries to maintain. Each person has identities, the meanings of which are set at certain levels of, for example, dominance, or fairness, or risk-taking. These meanings are not tied to the social structure in terms of being a group member or a role player, but characterize the individual across situations, across groups, and across roles. The meanings and the way in which these meanings are understood, of course, are given in the shared culture. People share an understanding of being moral or dominant and can understand and interpret the meanings of actions that indicate dominance or morality.

Identity Processes

The meanings relevant to each identity, whether it is a social identity, a role identity, or a person identity, are held in what is termed the *identity standard*. This standard is used to select behaviors when an identity is activated, behaviors that have meanings congruent with the meanings in the identity standard. When the identity is not activated, the meanings are dormant. The intellectual student may not act "intellectual" at a dinner party where the student identity is not activated. The person with a high moral identity may not act in a "moral" way when the identity is not activated. Depending upon the salience of the

identity, some identities may be activated more often than others, but the meanings people attempt to portray in their behavior will be congruent with the meanings in the identity standard when the identity is activated. Further, they will try harder to enact appropriate meanings when the identity is highly committed, as when many people know then individual in terms of the identity, or when the identity is prominent, or important to the individual.

People do not just automatically behave in ways that are consistent with their identities, however. Rather, the meanings of their behavior is constantly monitored to be sure they are congruent with those in the identity standard. People may find that at times they are behaving in ways that are, for example, more fair or less fair than the level of fairness in their moral identity due to situational factors or others' expectations. When this happens, people adjust the level of, in this case, the perceived fairness of their behavior until it matches the level in their identity standard. This is the *identity verification* process, and it is the main dynamic of how identities operate (2015, 2009).

In the identity verification process, people become aware of the meanings of their behavior through their own perceptions of their behavior and its consequences (direct appraisals) and, even more importantly, through their perceptions of how others interpret the meanings of their behavior (reflected appraisals). Others' views are important because symbolic meaning is socially constructed and maintained; the views of others matter (Mead 1934). If the meanings in the direct and reflected appraisals do not match who one is in an identity (the identity standard), one will feel distress and negative emotions and, as a consequence work to change their behavior to change how they are coming across in the situation (Burke 1991, 1996). They are successful in this verification process only when their reflected appraisal meanings match the identity standard meanings. Identity theory

makes it clear that people do not control their behavior, rather they control their

perceptions of how they are coming across in the situation, what meanings they are

portraying as understood in their reflected appraisals (Powers 1973). When the action is

successful in bringing their perceptions of self-relevant meanings into alignment with their

identity standard, identity verification has occurred. If people are practiced and skilled at

verifying an identity, their perceptions of identity relevant meanings are brought to

alignment with the standard meanings and maintained without most people being aware

that a control process is going on.

The actual behavior used to control the perceptions is not relevant except for its effects

on the meanings that are perceived, and this may change from time to time to maintain

control of perceptions. For example, if we are controlling to stay in the middle of our lane

while driving a car, we may have to turn the wheel left or right depending upon the way

the road turns, the wind gusts, lane marking change, etc. We only know what to do by

noting our perception of the current position of the car relative to our standard of where it

should be, and then taking appropriate action. The action needed is not constant and cannot

be foreseen. The same is true for the identity verification process. We need to increase or

decrease meanings constantly to keep the meanings in the situation consistent with the

identity meanings.

By measuring identity meanings and reflected appraisal meanings on the same scale, it

is possible to calculate the degree to which an identity is not verified as the difference

between the two measures. This difference or discrepancy is calculated as the reflected

appraisal measure minus the identity standard measure. If the reflected appraisal measure

of the academic responsibility meaning of the student identity were, for example, 1.97 and

the identity standard were 1.37, the difference, +.60, would indicate that the reflected

appraisals were higher than the identity; the person saw herself as less academically

oriented than she thought others saw her. Research has indicated that when this happens

the person will feel distressed and will act in an even less academically oriented fashion in

an attempt to convince others that she is less academically oriented than they thought. This

will continue until the reflected appraisals become 1.37, the same as the identity standard.

If the person over corrects, the process reverses itself, again to bring perceived meanings to

match identity standard meanings.

Notice that when the discrepancy is in the positive direction, the person acts in the

negative direction to counteract the disturbance that pushed the reflected appraisals too

positive. Similarly, if the discrepancy is in a negative direction (the reflected appraisals are

less than the identity standard), the person will behave in a more positive fashion, again to

counteract the disturbance (Burke 2003). Thus, the direction of the discrepancy is

important in guiding behavior to counteract the disturbance. The emotional reaction to the

discrepancy, however, is negative whether the reflected appraisals are higher than the

identity standard or lower than the identity standard. The squared discrepancy is the

measure that captures this since it is always a positive number, and it is the squared

discrepancy that predicts the level of negative emotion that people feel when their identity

is not verified (Stets and Burke 2014a, Burke and Harrod 2005). The intensity of the

emotion felt from the discrepancy becomes stronger as the discrepancy moves away from

zero. A two-unit discrepancy is felt four times as much as a one-unit discrepancy. People

work harder to avoid larger discrepancies and move their perceptions of identity relevant

meanings in the situation closer to the identity standard.

This model of behaving to control one's perceptions of identity relevant meanings in the

situation in order to verify one's identity was an important addition to identity theory based

on the work of Powers (1973) who recognized that human behavior is an outcome of the control of perceptions. That people act pragmatically, in whatever way achieves the goal of keeping perceptions of meaning in congruence with the identity standard. This is very much in keeping with the pragmatism of Mead (1934). This accounts for the multitude of ways in which people can achieve the same goal of verification; by keeping perceptions focused on the goal, we continue doing what we have to do to achieve the goal.

This does not mean that people are free to do whatever they want with no constraints, however, as we are constrained by the many identities we have. Stealing, a behavior that may advance us toward verifying one identity (getting money to support a family) may move us away from verifying another identity (being a moral person). Identity theory suggests that people act to keep all of their identities verified as best they can with more emphasis on those identities that have more commitment or more prominence (importance).

As people verify their identities by making perceived self-relevant meanings in the situation consistent with the meanings in their identity standard, more is happening than creating meanings in the situation to which others respond. If the identity is a social identity, those meanings make manifest to the self and others the group or category to which the individual belongs (ingroup), and in doing so, distinguishes the group or category from other groups or categories to which the individual does not belong (outgroups). Group boundaries are maintained and people know who is in the group and who is not. What it means to be in one group and not the other is made clear. Republicans are distinguished from Democrats, males from females, blacks from whites, my group from your group. Such ingroup and outgroup distinctions are both manifest and maintained by people verifying their social identities.

If the identity is a role identity, verification accomplishes the role or job to be done. If I am a delivery truck driver, for example, verifying my role delivers the packages, takes care of the truck, interacts with the dispatcher, gets delivery signatures, and so on. Verification accomplishes this in spite of disruptions and things that go wrong. Behaviors change to accomplish the verification in the best way possible. Looking at this across society, all of the functions of society are maintained by people verifying their role identities. Each person doing their role interacts with others doing their role in the vast network that is society.

Finally, the verification of person identities keeps us through time as the persons we are. We get to know what kind of persons we are. Others get to know what kind of persons we are. We avoid situations that make it difficult to verify our person identities. If we have an identity that is outgoing and social, we may avoid taking on a job or role in which we have little contact with others. If we our identity is not at all dominant, we may avoid leadership roles. In this way, person identities guide individuals into roles and groups which allow them to verify their person identities. Person identities become sorting mechanisms that help to guide persons into positions in society where they will be happy (verifying their person identity) and not be distressed or likely to leave. Stability at the societal level is maintained.

Identity Change

Keeping identities verified is the main identity process that drives behavior, but this is not always possible. Some disturbances are not easily controlled, sometimes the source of the disturbance to identity relevant meanings has more power than the person, for example, and employer has more power than the employee, and changes in situational meanings by

the employer that are relevant to the employee's identity may not be (easily) changed. If those meanings set by the employer are at odds with the employee's identity standard, and the employee cannot act to bring them into alignment with the employee's identity standard, the discrepancy will persist. Under these conditions, identity theory suggests that the employee's identity standard will slowly shift and change to be more like the meanings set by the employer. The identity changes and will ultimately bring the perceived meanings into agreement with the (modified) identity standard.

This process of identity change, however, is slow compared to the usual adjustment of meanings to bring them into alignment with the identity. Cast and Burke studied changes the gender identities of newly married couples (1997) over a period of three years. Part of the criteria for being included in the study is that the couple could not already have any children. The gender identities of these newly married individuals was measured at the beginning of the study and again a year later, during which time several of the couples did have children. A third measurement of the gender identities was made after another year, and during this period more children were born. Burke and Cast reasoned that the birth of a child provided a disturbance or change to the situational meanings that were relevant to the gender identities of the individuals; a change that could not be easily counteracted. Compared to the couples that did not have children during the first year, those couples that did have children experienced change in their gender identities. The husbands became more masculine and the wives became more feminine with the birth of a child. This change also occurred in the next year for those additional couples who had a child during that year. The amount of change was not large, though it was significant, occurring slowly over the period of a year.

The change in the gender identities was not deliberate or conscious, and day by day would not produce a recognizable difference, but persistently and slowly over time, the gender identities shifted. This suggests that identities are never "fixed". They are generally unchanging because the meanings that support and verify the identities in the situation are maintained to be congruent with the identity standards. But, should the meanings in the situation no longer be congruent with the identity standard, change begins to occur. The identities change in the direction of the disturbance even for small temporary disturbances, but the amount is so small it is not apparent. It only becomes apparent if the discrepancy between situational meanings and identity meanings persists long enough because the situational meanings cannot be altered (as with the birth of a baby). Thus, the change in the gender identity of the newly married couples who had a baby could be measured after the six or eight months that elapsed after the birth until the gender identities were again measured.

Self-Esteem

When identities are not verified, it was pointed out that people have a negative emotional response. Burke and Harrod (2005) showed that when the identities of newly married couples were not verified they felt increased distress, depression, and anger. Stets and Burke (2014a) replicated this work and showed that non-verification produced strong negative emotions (a combined scale including happiness (reversed), fear, disgust, anger, sadness, shame, guilt, and empathy (reversed)). These negative emotions help motivate a response to change meanings in the situation so that the reflected appraisals again match the identity standard and restore verification.

Continued verification, on the other hand, has positive effects — people feel good. More than that, however, research has shown that identity verification enhances one's self-esteem. Indeed, Cast and Burke (2002) suggested that the source of self-esteem was, in fact, the verification of identities, and that once built up through the verification process, self-esteem diminished the negative emotion that occurs when self-verification is problematic, thus allowing continued interactions and continuity in the structural arrangements provided by role and group membership. In this way, persons who had high self-esteem could persist longer in the achievement of verification than those without high self-esteem.

Stets and Burke (2014b) developed this idea further, pointing out that self-esteem had three different dimensions. The first dimension is *self-worth* or feeling good about oneself because one is in communion with others; one belongs and is worthy. Second is *self-efficacy*, or the feeling that one is competent and capable; one is effective in her actions. And third is *authenticity*, based on individual strivings for meaning, coherence, and understandings about the self; one is able to enact their "true self," be who one really is. Together, these three dimensions make up global self-esteem. Falling short on any of these dimensions is to have lower global self-esteem. Boosting any of these dimensions increases the level of global self-esteem.

Stets and Burke (2014b) point out that the idea that identity verification increases self-esteem as in the theory earlier put forth by Cast and Burke (2002), can be elaborated. They show that it is the verification of group (social) identities that increases self-worth, the verification of role-identities that increases self-efficacy, and the verification of person identities that increases a feeling of authenticity. In this way, Stets and Burke linked the different bases of identities to the different dimensions of global self-esteem. They

showed, for example, that the verification of one's gender identity (a social identity)

increases feelings of self-worth but not self-efficacy. They also showed that the

verification of the role identity of student (among college students) increased their self-

efficacy but not self-worth or authenticity. And finally, they showed that verification of

one's moral identity (a person identity — whether it was higher or lower) increases

feelings of authenticity (2014b).

In this way, there is a general alignment of the different bases of identities and the

different dimensions of self-esteem. However, this may be more of an analytic alignment

than an empirical one because in any situation, a person with a role identity may be part of

a group or organization, with its own identity, within which that role is defined. And there

may be other person identities the individual has that are activated. Since the person

identities are almost always relevant and roles are frequently within groups, there may be

few situations in which a single identity with a single basis is ever activated. To measure

the different effects of any identity basis is technically difficult, requiring the measurement

of the multiple identities across different bases along with the degree of verification of

each. Although the early research cited above is promising, more research is clearly

needed.

Multiple Identities

The fact that several identities with different bases may be activated at the same time

raises the question of the relationships among the multiple identities that individuals in

contemporary society hold. Whatever number of identities an individual has that influence

behavior, there is still only one individual whose behavior is influenced. And, the more

identities that are activated at one time, the more identities that are vying for control of that

behavior to maintain a state of verification. It is, perhaps a good thing that most identities are dormant or not activated most of the time.

If the meanings that are relevant for a particular identity are not manifest in a situation, then that identity is likely to not be activated unless the identity is highly salient. It that identity is highly salient, it may become activated, and the person may generate and control meanings that are consistent with the identity. It is possible, however, that such meanings may be deemed inappropriate by others in the situation, for example, if someone brings out vacation pictures of their spouse during a business meeting. This could result in the non-verification of their spouse identity, but it could also result in the non-verification of their business identity. Thus, even salient identities may not be activated too often.

If two identities control some of the same meanings, and the identity standard for each is set to the same value, for example, I am a fair person (9 out of 10) and I am a fair county judge (also 9 out of 10), then acting as a judge with a fairness level of 9 will verify the judge identity as well as the person identity. However, if my fairness person identity is a 9 and my identity as a county judge is only a 7 and both identities are activated, I have created a conflict situation for myself. If my behavior is 7, my judge identity is verified, but my person identity is not verified. Indeed, there is no behavior that can verify both identities. For this reason, people generally select groups and roles which will also verify their person identities and the above scenario is not likely to arise too often.

It may be that initially both the judge and the person identity were highly fair (9 out of 10), but situational pressures and demands may have made demands on the judge identity to be a 7 on one or more occasions. If that situation persists, and the person cannot counteract these pressures on the judge role, the persistent non-verification will produce distress, and over time, the person identity of fairness may change toward the lower level

of the judge. In all likelihood, the person will both act to counteract the situational

pressures on the judge identity and will experience identity change over time in the person

identity so that the two identity standard levels will come to be in agreement, perhaps at an

8 (somewhere between the lower levels demanded by the situation and the 9 demanded by

the person identity). It is also possible that the person learns to inactivate their fairness

person identity when sitting on the bench and activating the judge role identity. It is also

possible that the person chooses to leave the judge role and no longer have that identity. It

is only when both identities are activated that the conflict manifests itself.

When two identities have the same meaning dimension, such as fairness in the above

example, then the two identities can help each other control the meaning if both standards

are set to the same level. If the meaning is at different levels in the two identities then the

two identities are in conflict, each trying to make the meanings in the situation to be

different levels. If, however, the meanings controlled by one identity are irrelevant for the

meanings controlled by the other identity, then both meanings can be brought to the level

indicated in the identity standards and there is no conflict. Nor, is there any cooperation. In

this case, if the two identities are activated at the same time, the one individual holding the

two identities must act in such a way as to control both meanings — multitasking, so to

speak, in such a way that controlling one meaning occurs without disturbing the other

meaning. For example, if one identity requires that I wear a suit and tie, that can be done

without interference with my being more or less fair as my fairness identity requires.

Verifying both identities is thus possible and the person will act to counteract disturbances

to the verification of either identity and do their best to verify both at the same time. If one

identity is more prominent or important, it may be verified before the other, or the person

may work harder to verify that identity. Nevertheless, identity theory says that both

identities must be verified. Similarly, if there are more than two identities that are activated at the same time, a way must be found the verify all of them as much as possible.

The multiple identities discussed above are assumed to exist side by side, at the same level, so to speak, with each controlling perceptions of meaning relevant to their standards. However, identities also can be arranged in a hierarchical fashion, with one above the other. In this arrangement, the output of the higher identity is (part of) the standard of the lower identity. In this case the higher identity is one step removed from directly controlling perceptions. Rather than the output of the higher identity controlling perceptions by meaningful behavior, the higher identity helps to set the meanings in the identity standard of the lower identity. In this way, the higher identity controls its perceptions indirectly by controlling the meanings that the lower identity seeks to verify. A higher level identity can help to set the standards of several lower level identities. For example, one's gender identity is often at a higher level than many of the role identities one holds. Being female helps set the meanings that define being a student, or a friend, or a truck driver. That is to say, what it means to be a friend varies by the kind of gender identity one has.

In this hierarchical arrangement of the identity control system, the higher identity achieves verification indirectly through the lower identities it controls. The higher identity does not verify itself directly, but, in a sense, gets the lower level identities to do that. In the above example of a female gender identity being manifest in being, for example, a female student, a female friend, or a female truck driver, the gender identity is verified through the way in which the student, friend or truck driver identity is manifest. If the perceptions at the higher, gender identity level do not match the meanings in the gender identity standard, the output from the gender identity modified the meanings of the student, friend, or truck driver identities, and through that modifies the student, friend, or truck

driver role performances to bring about the verification of the gender identity (as well as verification of the lower level identities of student, friend, or truck driver).

A study by Tsushima and Burke (1999) illustrated some of these principles of the hierarchical levels of control in identities. They examined the parent identity and found that some of the meanings of being a parent were at a higher level, concerned with general principles such as raising the children to be independent, than other meanings of the parent identity that were concerned with the lower level procedures for accomplishing particular tasks such as getting the children to make their bed. They found that parents who focused their parenting on controlling perceptions relevant to the more abstract principles such as being independent and taking responsibility for oneself had an easier and less stressful time of it than parents who focused entirely on the lower level perceptions relevant to getting the children to make their bed, be ready for school on time, clean up their rooms, etc. without attending to the more general principles. In effect, by focusing on the lower level perceptions without having them be manifestations of higher level principles such as being independent, both parents and children jumped from one little task to another without rhyme or reason. Parents had to control the children accomplishing each and every little task rather than accomplishing all of them as part of the process of being independent.

In general, the multiple identities that people have are not independent of one another. There can be conflict among them when the meanings are at odds with one another as well as cooperation among them when the meanings align. When there is conflict, the meanings in the conflicting identities prevent verification which leads to distress and a tendency for the identities to change slowly over time to be in accord and thus reduce the conflict. There can also be control relationship among identities at different levels where higher level identities set the identity standard meanings of the lower level identities. When this is the

case, conflict is minimized and verification of the lower identities helps to indirectly verify the higher level identities.

Conclusion

Identities tell us what it means to be who we are. They tell us how to act and they tell others how to act toward us. Identities ties us as individuals to society in terms of the groups, the social categories, and the roles we are born into, take on, or join. The identity meanings that define us as Americans or family members or the jobs we have or the associations to which we belong, these meanings when verified, provide our life with meaning, make us feel good, and give us self-esteem. And, when these identity meanings are not verified, we become distressed, depressed, and life seems meaningless and void. The key is verification, a largely social process that depends upon others and how we perceive their reactions toward us. If we are successful in verifying our identities, we not only feel good, but we are doing our part to maintain the structure of society, maintaining the social divisions and categories, the groups and organizations, and the roles that connect us to others.

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